

Proposed speech to National Stress Network Conference: Saturday 23rd November 2013.

Thank you for inviting me to speak today particularly to follow Phil Taylor – it is difficult to add much to what he covers.

Anyway I'm John McClean, National H&S Officer for the GMB which currently has over 624,000 members split roughly equally across the private and public sectors, and I've worked for GMB for over 20 years in a H&S role.

Sometimes leaving GMB congress I'd be stopped by passers-by who see the GMB logo and they will ask what does GMB stand for- I'm sure they mean the letters not philosophically- and you have to explain that it is short for GMBATU, the General Municipal Boilermakers and Allied Trade Unions. You can see why we shortened it!

Like many of the bigger unions we are a result of mergers over the years. But I'm sure that the perception exists in some circles that it is a general labourers union. Nothing could be further from the truth- from ASDA to Nuclear Power, From Utilities to Transport, Food & Drink to Public services our membership is diverse.

But the occupational health problems are also wide ranging and a growing issue among these is stress. I was asked today to provide the trade union perspective, both here and in Europe.

However first I think that we need to examine the propaganda machinery around stress. These days I read an electronic newspaper but occasionally I'll pick up a London Evening Standard on the train and my eye was caught by one (confusing) article recently- "staff are under increasing pressure, but not just at work".

Chris Jessop of AXA Healthcare, who may have had a vested interest in the content of the article is quoted as saying – "there are an equal number of personal issues that impact on employees as there are work related pressures. The number one is personal financial concerns, followed by organisational change, shift work, Irregular hours, difficulty in talking to managers, and unacceptable relationships at home".

So the majority, indeed all those in the middle, directly relate to the workplace- could I also suggest that the first one relating to wages, casual employment, zero hours and all the other impacts on personal finance might just have something to do with employment status.

And as for the last one – little puts more strain on a personal relationship than either partner bringing home work related problems, including financial ones.

He then goes on to say, and this is the vested interest bit, that they run a 24/7 telephone counselling service and that over 50% of the calls are related to psychological issues.

It reminds me of the skewed emphasis on peoples hobbies in the 80's & 90's around RSI- does she knit? Does he play badminton? Rather than examine the hundreds or thousands of repetitive tasks undertaken in a day, instead let's put the blame on the individual.

So be warned – an employer or manager's first line of defence in attempting to evade dealing with workplace stress will be one of denial!

So how should we as trade unionists approach this? Look for a legislative approach? Under this government, enforced by a defenestrated HSE? Stress was not a factor in the arbitrary definition in high and low risk workplaces. So we really only have the guidance of the HSE management standards.

Perhaps further afield in Europe. Positively some states such as Denmark and Italy have stress recognised in their legal approach to risk assessments. But as a European Work Hazards Network report in April this year clearly shows that it is one thing to be included in the legislation, it is another to get this enforced or for the employer to take seriously enough.

Right across Europe there is a lack of adequate workplace inspection by the Labour Inspectorate- it is not just the UK that has this problem.

Earlier this year the European Union Commission on Social Affairs & Inclusion held a joint meeting with the ETUC in Brussels to discuss a Europe wide H&S Strategy for 2013 -2020, though as we are now nearly, through 2013 I think we can consider this a gap year, to look at the workplace issues that would impact on occupational health across Europe.

New technology, endocrine disrupters, violence and bullying, an ageing workforce and psycho-social disorders such as stress were all emphasised for inclusion.

If you go to the ETUI website and type in –“The EU's untold story: the EU's H&S strategy” with I think the emphasis on untold you will see how dynamic some of the proceedings were.

So are there any reasons to be cheerful? Well think of the context- next year sees the European elections and the only thing they have in common across Europe is the rise of the right.

From Austria's Freedom Party to the Danes DPP, from the Front National in France to Golden Dawn in Greece to our very own UKIP- do you think that many of these are going to

put workplace concerns such as stress near the top of their individual or collective work programmes?

Unfortunately whatever previously positive initiatives that may have emanated from Europe I wouldn't hold out much hope in the near future.

So let's look at the UK then. Our election, assuming all goes according to plan is due the following year. Obviously how the economy is performing and the overall financial confidence in society will dominate in the run up to the election.

However we need to concentrate on H&S at work issues. Earlier this year Hugh Robertson from the TUC launched a 10 point manifesto on H&S.

Issues covered include workplace inspections and better regulations for Safety Reps, and manifesto point 3 – Occupational Health to have the same priority as injury prevention.

This is expanded into: Trade Unions want strong regulation aimed at preventing stress, musculoskeletal disorders, bullying and violence, with more emphasis by enforcers on occupational illness. Unions also believe that all workers should have free access to both health surveillance and comprehensive occupational health provision, either from a public body set up for that purpose or from services provided through the NHS. The saving to the economy would exceed the cost as it would greatly reduce sickness absence as well as help prevent people becoming dependant on benefits.

All highly laudable but is it achievable? Many of us have used the societal cost benefit argument in the past and while you might expect businesses not to worry as the main cost of people suffering are paid from by society and the tax payer surely government, particularly in a time when resources are being squeezed, should be taking a more logical approach.

I wonder why the Tax Payer's Alliance never makes reference to how employers, many in the private sector, expect us to pick up the costs or their individual and collective negligence.

I think we all know the answer- it is another part of the propaganda machinery.

So if we get an incoming sympathetic government in a couple of years can we expect a different emphasis on occupational health? I'm not so sure how many of them would be able to either understand the reality or articulate the message.

In essence it looks as though we are going to have to rely on the front line army of trade union safety reps. Now I have been to enough Hazards conferences and talked to enough

safety reps right across the UK to know that an already difficult task is not getting any easier.

It doesn't matter if you work in the private or public sectors- there is a definite squeeze on facility time which paradoxically affects those reps who want to go the extra mile and don't like unfinished business. Their own personal situation is under strain.

So how do we help them at a local, regional or national level? Essentially you need to think about how your union could help you at a workplace level. You need to convince them through your democratic structures. This might involve putting motion to your decision making conferences on having national or regional officers with a H&S specialism.

It might be on branches ensuring that one or more reps get special training in dealing with stress issues. None of this will be easy. Trade unions concentrate on industrial and political issues as that is their historic method for approaching the world of work. It is time for a re-think and a re-emphasis on how we approach occupational health issues such as stress.

A couple of years ago at the Hazards conference in Keele Doug Russell from USDAW looking back on the evolution of H&S in the workplace since the introduction of the Health & safety at Work Act and following its' introduction the SRSC Regulations. Just as now it would appear that at a national level General Secretaries and National officers were slow to recognise how the use of health, safety and welfare issues could be good for both representation and recruitment.

The trade unions have often advocated the Slogan –“ Agitate, Educate & Organise”. Perhaps we now need to change this slightly to – “ Agitate, Re-educate - to Organise”.

Good luck with your conference and thank you.

(JMc 14/11/13)